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# **International students as curriculum advisers for academic writing courses: staff-student partnerships in English for Academic Purposes (EAP)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite the financial benefits that international students bring to the UK economy as well as to the institutions at which they study, HE institutions currently take little or no account of the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986) that international students also bring to the academy. Many international students come from a position of prior disciplinary and/or professional knowledge. Many also go on to develop disciplinary, writing and/or teaching expertise during their studies in the UK. This makes them invaluable informants for academic writing curriculum developers and teachers. This paper argues that international students can actively contribute to academic writing curriculum development by critiquing lesson materials and suggesting alternative content and teaching strategies. Preliminary findings of the research, which is currently funded by UKCISA as a pilot project, suggest that international students can indeed make valuable contributions to academic writing course planning and materials writing.

## **Introduction**

This paper describes research undertaken for a pilot project funded by the UKCISA organisation<sup>1</sup>. The aim of the project was to investigate the feasibility of involving international students directly in curriculum design for academic writing courses at an English Language Centre (ELC). The project is focussed on enhancing the curriculum of a 25-session in-session course, the Academic Writing Workshop.

The majority of students who take the Workshop are international students. Over the years, course feedback has been collected in a variety of ways, mostly written and mostly post-course. However, the researcher, who is also the curriculum designer and teacher of the Workshop, feels that current feedback mechanisms focus mainly on holistic issues such as student satisfaction and are therefore insufficiently fine-grained to assist with curriculum development.

Traditionally, university students have not been included in curriculum decision-making (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Hughes, 2005; Johns, 2008). This is beginning

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk>

to change: indeed, some researchers argue that students can be agents of change in curriculum design (Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson, 2010; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Healey, 2012). There are also clarion calls for greater student involvement in curriculum design by higher education interest groups such as the Higher Education Academy (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014) and the National Union of Students (NUS, 2016). However, the “cultural capital” that international students bring to the host institution in the form of disciplinary knowledge, work experience, technical expertise, linguistic expertise, and so on (Bourdieu, 1986; Tran, 2010) tends to be overlooked in this literature.

In fact, international students are invaluable sources of disciplinary and institutional information for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioners: a point overlooked, for example, in Ding and Champion’s (2016) account of *ad hoc* EAP teacher development enablers. In the researcher’s experience, many international students develop disciplinary and genre writing expertise during their studies at the UK institution, though they may initially struggle with the norms of Anglophone academic literacy (Wingate, 2015). Moreover, international students are often generous with their time and with their contributions of writing samples. These samples of what Swales (1990; 2004) calls “occluded genres” would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, for EAP practitioners to obtain in sufficient quantity for genre analysis.

## **Exploratory study: methods and findings**

In order to demonstrate ways in which the cultural capital of the international students could be harnessed, a small exploratory study was developed in 2015-2016. Three undergraduate third-years were invited to critique the main handout and slides from the first session of the Academic Writing Workshop. The three students were given the title of “Student Adviser”, which they could add to their CVs. They were asked to assess and annotate the materials (in hard or soft copy as they preferred), and discuss their reactions with the curriculum designer.

By asking the students to critique the same set of materials, it was hypothesized that it would be possible to evaluate the suitability of international students as curriculum advisers. The research questions were fourfold. Firstly, would all of the students be able to articulate their ideas for improving the materials? Secondly, would they be able to critique the materials in a constructive manner? Thirdly, would their disciplinary knowledge enhance the materials, or would their requests for change prove to be too specific for a multi-disciplinary class? Finally, would their views conflict with each other or with the views of the curriculum designer?

The exploratory study demonstrated that all three students could easily articulate their ideas for curriculum change. Their critiques were both constructive and insightful, and there were no conflicts between the three points of view, or between the students and the curriculum designer. In fact, their “talk around text” (Lillis, 2009) allowed the curriculum designer to add discipline-specific comments to the lecture slides, and also made it possible to evaluate the suitability of the text samples used in the materials, some of which had been problematic in the previous course rollout.

## **Pilot project: aims and methods**

Realizing, in the light of the staff-student partnership literature (e.g. Little, 2011; Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014), that curriculum development with international students was viable but needed to be formalised, a pilot project was then designed. Funding was obtained from the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) for the year 2016-17. The main aim of the pilot project was to develop a procedure for partnership: in other words, setup and implementation were seen as equally important to the data collected and to the curriculum improvements.

Purposive sampling was used to invite international students to take part in the pilot project. At the first project meeting, unstructured interviews were conducted with each participant. Ethnographic field notes were taken and later transcribed to see what skillsets and areas of expertise emerged. At the first meeting, each Curriculum Adviser was also given the full first session set of Academic Writing Workshop materials (1 main handout, 4 supplementary handouts and 1 set of slides) to critique. The Advisers were asked where they would prefer to work (a workstation is available in the researcher's office) and how long they would need to complete their critiques: the same courtesies that would be extended to staff members. The Advisers were also asked if they would prefer materials in hard copy, soft copy or both. The remaining interview time was then used to explain the aims and stages of the project.

In order to establish the "trust, reciprocity and mutual respect" needed for successful staff-student partnerships (Cook-Sather, Felten & Bovill, 2014), two more steps were taken. Firstly, all project participants were given full access to key project documents (except confidential student data) via Dropbox and were copied in to all relevant e-mail correspondence. Secondly, the title given to the student participants was changed from "Student Adviser" to "Curriculum Adviser": it was agreed that the latter sounds more professional. When the Curriculum Advisers returned with the materials at a time of their own choosing, they were asked to discuss them in any preferred order. Their reactions to the materials were noted, collated in a single document, and used to rewrite the materials. As Advisers were working at different speeds, an interim task was devised: a commercially-produced academic writing book was given to be critiqued. It was stressed that the whole book did not need to be read, that reactions to the book could be recorded in any way that the Advisers preferred, and that we would discuss the book during a semi-structured recorded interview.

In the next step of the pilot project, a second round of materials was chosen by the Curriculum Advisers. The Advisers could choose lessons they had taken or might wish to take. Reactions were recorded in the same way as in the first round. Finally, a focus group was audio-recorded to discover the Advisers' reactions to the materials and to the project as a whole. The recording was transcribed in full and is currently being thematically coded.

## **Pilot project: preliminary findings**

The initial interviews showed that the skill-sets of the six Curriculum Advisers (one PhD candidate and five Taught Master's students) were far more impressive than the

researcher had anticipated. All six had prior disciplinary knowledge, three had cross-disciplinary knowledge and five had professional knowledge from jobs and/or internships. The PhD candidate was already teaching undergraduate classes and taking in-house teaching qualifications; she and one other Master's student also had experience of teaching in developing countries. One Master's student had professional expertise as a translator and interpreter in her home country and as an inspirational speaker for a UK-based charity. Another Master's student had designed and built an educational website and a mobile phone app during her undergraduate studies in Educational Technology. All the students from the taught Master's courses had received consistently high grades from Term 2 onwards (above 70%) and the PhD candidate was publishing her first peer-reviewed journal paper. It was clear that international students can indeed be "expert knowers" (Maton, 2014) as well as "expert learners" (Stobart, 2014).

Several key concerns emerged from the Curriculum Adviser's materials critiques. The main concern was that there needed to be a wider variety of text types in the materials. A lesser concern was that the Workshop slides were visually unattractive and did not always match the handouts. Critiquing of commercially-produced academic writing books was also a valuable exercise, enabling the researcher to recommend these works to other students.

Dissemination of the project via conferences and published papers formed one of the planned outcomes of the project. So far, the research has been disseminated via in-house forums, and at conferences in the UK and Norway. Four Curriculum Advisers have presented: three with staff members, and two by themselves. Three conference papers are now underway, with three Curriculum Advisers as co-authors. All four Advisers mentioned at the focus group how much they valued the opportunity to participate in presenting and publishing.

## Conclusion

This study has shown how partnerships with international students can be of value in the development of EAP courses. Many cultural insights emerged into matters such as source use and referencing: the researcher now has much more understanding of the reasons why international students struggle so much with this aspect of academic writing. The presence of two STEM students in the project team also allowed the scope of the Academic Writing Workshop materials to be broadened. One of the STEM students is now helping the researcher to develop materials for a "*Writing for Engineers*" course covering academic and professional writing, both of which are required elements of her Master's programme.

The Curriculum Advisers have suggested ways of taking the project forward, including live critiquing of Academic Writing Workshop sessions: this will be done in 2017-18. They have also proposed a video project in which Curriculum Advisers will talk about their deepened understanding of academic cultural differences. It is clear that the international students involved in this project do not wish to be passive recipients of curriculum but want to be, and are capable of being, dynamic agents of change (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Healey, 2012). As the study presented in this paper is a pilot project, further research is planned.

## About the Author

Terri Edwards studies part-time at Durham University School of Education under the supervision of Dr Nicola Reimann, Dr Catherine Marshall, and Professor Douglas Newton. She is currently in the first year of the thesis phase of her EdD. She is also a full-time teacher at an English Language Centre, where she teaches academic writing and study skills to anybody of any level or nationality who needs her help.

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